

## **Report of the Local History Room/Archives Work Group Library 21 Committee**

### **Summary**

The City's local history collections and archives are located in a wide variety of spaces, few of which are adequate to the task. Important materials have survived in spite of the harsh conditions in which they are kept. However, inadequate storage facilities not only threaten the continued existence of much material, but make it impossible to gain access to some of the most important collections.

Public libraries typically fulfill some of the functions of local historical societies by providing facilities for local history materials and genealogical publications. Library collections can include ephemera, maps, plans, and objects as well as more easily catalogued and shelved books. Local history rooms are usually specialized spaces that allow storage and use of unique objects in climate-controlled conditions.

Municipal archives are another specialized facility that may be associated with public libraries. Archives hold some of the raw materials that will be of interest to the local history researcher, but also contain specialized documents that may not be of general interest.

The Cambridge Room in the Main Branch contains a valuable collection of local history materials. It is widely seen as inadequate: inaccessible, cramped, and not climate-controlled. While the materials are well kept and catalogued, the arrangement of the room is such that reference staff diverted from other duties must supervise the users. Consequently, the room is underutilized.

Other organizations perform some of the functions of the Cambridge Room. Both the Cambridge Historical Society and the Cambridge Historical Commission have extensive collections of local material. The Commission's strength is architecture, development, and economic history; because it is open during regular working hours its collections are relatively heavily used. The Society's collections are more in the realm of social history, and are available only a few hours a week.

Cambridge municipal archives are kept in scattered locations under the jurisdictions of the various departments. Important collections are maintained by the City Clerk; the City Engineer; the Auditor; the Assessors; the Election Commission; the Historical Commission; the School Department; and the Library, which holds much material outside the Cambridge Room. IN addition, there are many artifacts of considerable interest that require specialized storage and/or display areas.

Because Cambridge has never had a destructive fire in a municipal building, municipal records exist back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with significant continuous runs beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While state law requires that a specific custodian, such as the City Clerk must maintain some records, and that other older records must be retained in perpetuity, most departments have no immediate use for the bulk of their records.

The new main library offers the opportunity for a useable local history room for an expanded collection that could be drawn from other city agencies and from the public. If sufficient vault space could be developed, departmental collections could be consolidated, properly curated, and made available to researchers.

The benefits of an enhanced local history room, along with a municipal archive, include enhancing the efficiency of local government decision-making by making historic records available; increasing awareness of the city's rich and diverse history; increasing opportunities for research by local citizens and tourists alike; and providing a centralized, professionally managed resource for all groups interested in local history.

## I. Existing Municipal Collections

Existing Municipal Collections are housed in a variety of vaults under widely varying conditions. The largest collection is held by the Cambridge Public Library, but several departments also retain significant quantities of historical material.

### A. Cambridge Room, Cambridge Public Library

#### a. Physical conditions

The Cambridge Room, which contains the Cambridge Public Library's collection of local history materials, consists of a single room in the 1888 main library containing about 550 square feet. While it is nominally on the second floor, it is located high over the former main reading room and is, in essence, an attic. It is reached by a single staircase, has no second means of egress, and is not accessible to the handicapped. The space is not climate controlled, and becomes extremely hot in the summer.

Facilities for researchers consist of a single table. Since the facility consists of a single room, the entire collection is within reach of users, who consequently must be supervised at all times. There are no trained archivists on the staff, and only one staff member is familiar with the contents of the collection. Access, which is extremely limited, is controlled by the reference staff, who must be present when the room is in use.

#### b. Collections

The Cambridge Room collection is well catalogued and housed adequately in steel filing cabinets and flat files on open shelves. It contains city records; the notes of the city's most prominent historian, Lucius Paige; atlases and maps; and some rare objects, such as a banner carried by the Cambridge branch of the Know-Nothing Party in the 1840s. Most of the content of the Cambridge Room would be included in a city archive only if it were built as part of a new library building. Otherwise, the library would retain this material.

### B. Municipal Archives

Individual departments keep the City's archives with varying degrees of protection and care. State law requires that all records dating from before 1870 must be retained, and establishes minimum retention schedules for other types of records. Vital statistics, for example, must be retained indefinitely, while payroll records may be discarded after seven years. A record manager was employed by the city for some years during the 1980s; during

this period, standards for retention were implemented and many older records were reorganized and stored in improved conditions. However, this position was eliminated and record management was once again made the sole responsibility of the individual departments.

In January 1997 the staff of the Historical Commission conducted a preliminary survey of records held by ten city departments. This survey identified vaults and record storage rooms in seven municipal buildings and assessed the conditions in each. Most record groups were identified by their subject and date, and measured to determine their volume.

Many of the storage areas in city hall are vaults that date from the original constructions of the building. They are fireproof by the standards of the day, and have steel doors. In most, the walls are lined with steel shelves designed to accommodate the open tin boxes in which most municipal records were formerly kept. Most have a very small floor area, but high ceilings; a typical vault might measure six feet wide and eighteen feet long, for an area of only 108 square feet, but have twelve foot ceilings that afford extensive shelving. Some, especially in the basement, contain active plumbing. None are climate controlled.

Vaults of this type are no longer efficient, and many are underutilized. Until the 1950s, municipal records and correspondence were kept on standard sheets of paper that were folded in thirds and filed vertically in open tin boxes about 12" deep. These boxes were sorted by the hundreds on steel shelves that were designed for them, and were an efficient use of the typical vault, with its small floor area but large wall space. Modern record storage utilizes cardboard storage boxes that are from 16" to 24" deep; these cannot be easily accommodated in the typical vault.

The results of the survey are summarized below and detailed in the appendix.

1. Auditor

The Auditor is appointed by the City Council to review the expenditures of the executive branch of city government. In general, the auditor's records are comprised of contracts and financial records of capital purchases and operating expenses. The Auditor maintains a vault on the first floor of City Hall and a record storage room in the basement. Relatively few of the Auditor's current records are retained or appear to be significant over the long run.

2. Assessing Department

The Assessors evaluate the value of real property for tax purposes, and their records are among the most important for the historical purposes. Record from the late 18<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries have been microfilmed and are available at the Cambridge Public Library; many early 20<sup>th</sup> century assessors records are kept in the basement of the Public Works building.

The Assessors' vault, on the second floor of City Hall, contains primarily current records.

3. City Clerk

The City Clerk is appointed by the City Council and has the most important record-keeping functions of any city official. The Clerk maintains records of all the deliberations of the Council, including council orders, ordinances, and reports, as well as the correspondence of the Council. IN addition, the Clerk maintains the vital records of the city, including birth, marriage and death records. Most of this material must be permanently retained under the jurisdiction of the City Clerk (although not necessarily on the same premises). The vital records are in constant demand by the public.

The City Clerk maintains six vaults and/or storage areas. The vault in the clerk's office on the main floor of City Hall contains recent vital records, while older records and city council proceedings are kept in the five basement storage areas. Because four of these areas have very low ceilings, shelf space is limited. Active plumbing lines pass through or near these basement areas, creating a hazardous condition for the records stored there.

#### 4. Election Commission

The Elections Commission occupies a large storage room of about 330 square feet on the third floor of the Police Headquarters. The building is fireproof, as required for state law for election records, but no other special measure have been taken. Some older poll tax lists are on microfilm with the records of the Assessors, and some voter registration records are kept in the basement of the Public Works building.

#### 5. Engineering

The City Engineer occupies a 1,000 square-foot vault in the basement of the Public Works building at 1478 Hampshire Street. The Engineering collection contains thousands of plans and drawings that illustrate the city's infrastructure. While the earliest is a plot plan on sheepskin dating from 1748, the bulk of the collection dates from the period after the opening of the West Boston Bridge in 1793. Significant record groups include private surveyor's subdivision plans for all sections of Cambridge from 1800 through 1930; drawings prepared by successive City Engineers for street grades and layouts, sewers, and water pipes; designs for bridges and seawalls; and printed maps. Large quantities of drawings are on tracing paper, which poses difficult conservation problems.

While the engineer's vault is spacious and well organized, there are numerous plumbing lines running through it. Sensors will warn of a drop in water pressure or a build up on the floor, but this important collection must be counted as among the most vulnerable in the city. A comprehensive archive assessment was conducted by the Northeast Document Conservation Center in 1983, and many of those recommendations have been followed.

#### 6. Historical Commission

The Historical Commission is a regulatory agency that also holds several significant collections. One focus of the Commission is the city's architectural and social history, and it maintains an inventory of information on all 13,000 Cambridge structures that has been in continuous development since 1964.

The collection also contains original copies of almost all known maps and atlases of Cambridge; an extensive collection of city directories and municipal reports; significant collections of personal and business papers; and about 26,000 photographs of Cambridge buildings, scenes, and individuals. The Commission also has a small collection of architectural fragments and artifacts relating to Cambridge industries.

The Commission's collections are currently housed at the City Hall Annex, an 1877 school that is neither fireproof nor climate controlled, and occupy a space of about 400 square feet. About a third of the collection would be more appropriately held in a historical society or local history room, and all of it would benefit from a more appropriate location.

#### 7. Public Library

In addition to the Cambridge Room, which is described above, the library actively collects municipal records and holds a large collection of unprocessed records in storage boxes and holds a large collection of unprocessed records in storage boxes and bound volumes. Storage facilities include another floor room and a basement area in the main library, as well as a large basement in the East Cambridge Branch Library at 48 Sixth Street.

#### 8. Public Works

The Public Works Department has a large record storage area in the basement of the headquarters building at 149 Hampshire Street. Divided into secure cages adjacent to the City Engineer's vault, the storage area consists of about 1,400 square feet of space filled with steel shelves. In general, the contents include records of the City Clerk, Assessors, and the Public Works Department itself, contained in oversized ledgers, bound volumes, open tin boxes with vertical tri-folds, rolled and flat plans, record boxes, and index cards. The facility is well kept and dry, but not climate controlled. All of these materials should be catalogued and stored on compact shelving in an archive facility.

#### 9. Rent Control

The records of the Rent Control Department include the proceedings of the board and records of all controlled structures. Except for a small amount of summary data held by the Law Department and the Historical Commission, all records will be discarded in 2004.

#### 10. Treasurer

The records of the treasurer are almost all-current documents, which are held in a large vault on the first floor of City Hall.

#### 11. Other Departments

Several city departments were not surveyed, including the School, Police, Fire, and Water Departments. All are known to hold small quantities of historical records, but their extent and significance cannot be judged at this time.

#### I. Assessment of Local History Rooms/Archives In Comparable Libraries

Almost all public libraries appear to have local history rooms and/or collections. IN most communities, the local history room is a place where the unique artifacts of a community and its history can be placed on display for public viewing, as well as a facility for researchers. Several Massachusetts communities have included expanded local history rooms in their new libraries, and some have included municipal archives as well.

CONCORD: The Concord Free Library includes a town archive housing records once stored at the Town Hall. The facilities include a local history room of approximately 1,000 square feet with a collection of local historical and genealogical books as well as photographs, pamphlets, and ephemera, and a large vault for the town archives. A separate 1,500-square-foot climate controlled vault houses the town records, archives, library archives, and a manuscript collection of about 800 linear feet. Stored separately is a collection of first editions of works by Concord authors and critical or biographical works about these authors. The vault was created during an expansion of the library completed in 1991 that also was the remodeling of the local history reading room. The space was outgrown almost as soon as it was occupied.

MALDEN: With the opening of its new wing, the Malden Public Library is restoring its original 3,400 square foot reading room, designed by H.H. Richardson, to house its Malden history and genealogy collections. AN adjoining 864 square foot room has been given over to the Malden Historical Society for its collection. The historical society is installing exhibit cases and will provide volunteers to assist the librarians in staffing the area. A shortage of funding for the new construction and restoration has delayed measures for installing needed climate control features in the original building.

WALTHAM: As part of its recent expansion, the Waltham Public Library created a local history room in what had been the original children's room. What had previously been the Director's office became the office for a trained archivist hired to work with the local history collection. Special gates were designed to separate a portion of the room as a secure area for rare materials. The size of the combined areas is approximately 1,400 square feet. The room is on the main floor and very attractive, with oak paneling and a fireplace. With the rare materials secured behind the gates, the room is open the same hours as the rest of the building, even when the archivist is not available. Unfortunately, there is no climate control.

WESTON: A 1,000 square foot local history room was included in a new \$5,000,000 Weston Public Library. Originally this space was also intended to house the collection

of the Weston Historical Society as well as materials owned by the library. This plan later fell through over issues of control. Although work space and running water had been requested for this area, these were not included in the final plan. The area has climate control but is experiencing some problems with it. New dehumidification equipment is planned to cope with an ongoing problem of excessive humidity. The room is in the basement and has no windows. Some workspace has been arranged in a neighboring graphics and printing room. There is no separate staffing for the room, which is now open by appointment only. Plans are in the works to utilize volunteers from the Historical Society in order to open the room on at least a limited basis.

PLYMOUTH: Plymouth's new main library, designed by Sasaki Associates of Watertown, includes two rooms: a small anteroom with comfortable chairs donated by a prominent local family and a reading room for the collection, which contains about 1,500 books on locked shelves and a genealogy collection on open shelves. There is no separate stack area or workroom, both of which are sorely missed. Functionally, the local history room is administered by Adult Reference services; although the room is unstaffed, the local historical society provides part-time assistance through a pool of about 25 volunteers. The Town of Plymouth maintains a separate archive administered by the Town Clerk.

## II. Recommendations

The Cambridge Room/city archives should consist of at least two rooms: a record storage area and an area for processing materials and doing research (Even if some records are stored off-site, some high-use material should be located in the Main Library). Often, three rooms are provided so that the processing and research activities are separated, but staffing levels need to be taken into account in this matter. A separate room for record storage allows the climate control to be set at 56 degrees Fahrenheit with 45% humidity, which people generally find uncomfortable.

In addition to having a stable temperature and relative humidity, the record storage area should be protected from potential water leaks. The area should also have lighting that emits a minimum of ultraviolet light, and be equipped with moveable shelving, as called for in the Cohen Report, which will increase its capacity for 80% to more than 100%. With this shelving, the 2,535 linear feet of historical material identified by the Historical Commission can be accommodated in a space of 1,270 square feet, but this does not take into account the consideration that archival collections grow continually. In addition, the minimum amount of space needed for an archive processing and research room is 850 square feet.

Much material that has been retained by the city could and should be stored off-site. It is estimated that 60% to 75% of Cambridge's archived municipal documents could be placed in remote storage. However, all this material must be fully catalogued before it is stored in a secure, climate-controlled archive. Records would then be recovered on demand and would not consume valuable library space. Acquisition of an off-site space, perhaps on a long-term lease basis, should be undertaken early in the execution phase of implementing an archive. Organization of the archive will require a labor-intensive effort and the outset, and a continuing, lower-level staffing commitment into the indefinite future. Cataloguing the city's collections will probably require the services of an archivist and one or two assistants for up to two years. This effort can be scheduled to conclude with the completion of library construction. Once the cataloguing phase is completed, materials can be designated for

placement in the new archive or in remote storage. Continued operation of the facility could be the responsibility of a single archivist.

Organizationally, the archive could be placed within the library. However, additional operating funds must be committed for this purpose; existing library staff and resources cannot be diverted to a new archive, or both the library and the archive will suffer in the long run. The annual operating cost of an established archive could be estimated as twice the cost of the archivist's salary, including benefits.

While the archivist should report to the library director on an operational basis, a supervisory committee should be formed to guide archive policies. The City Clerk, the Historical Commission, and the City Engineer (as well as other departments with a state in the archive) should be represented on this body. In addition, the library director should be given authority to act as the city's record manager to enable the efficient collection of city records.

Finally, the archive could also be seen as a repository for non-municipal organizations with significant historical collections. Many churches, community groups, and individuals have important collections that could appropriately be housed in a Cambridge archives.

### Guidelines for Establishing Municipal Archives

James Terrence French

Archives Division

Secretary of the Commonwealth

### ESTABLISHING A MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES

One of the most fundamental, and often one of the most overlooked responsibilities of city and town government is the preservation of the historic records of the municipality. As guarantors of the rights and responsibilities of the municipality and its citizens and for the continuity of government policy, as witness to the very legitimacy of the government, and as a record of the development of the community, these records are crucial to our understanding of and our ability to function in our contemporary society. It is the duty of public officers to ensure that this historical record is maintained and that it continues to be accessible to future generations.

To address this responsibility, many municipalities have established their own archives programs. Properly established, these are dynamic and continuing operations designed to



support municipal operations and serve the needs of the research community at large by accepting the physical custodianship of the inactive records of the municipality that have permanent value, and providing for their safe preservation and reference access.

Any archives program that is to succeed must be institutionalized as a permanent municipal function and address its prime areas of responsibility (control, preservation, and access) on a government-wide basis. Because of the legal and operational constraints affecting the custodianship, security, and accessibility of records, an archives program should be established under the aegis of a municipal ordinance or by law, which would set the parameters within which the archives would function. The ordinance or bylaw should establish a number of general and specific provisions;

1. A position such as Archivist or Keeper of the Archives must be established as a municipal office charged with the maintenance of the municipality's archival records. Chapter 66 GLM vests title to public records in the municipality. This position may be established as an independent office or as a function of an existing office such as Town or City Clerk or the municipal library; some towns have found it efficient to designate the archivist deputy to the municipal clerk. In establishing and filling this position, it must be borne in mind that it will entail a substantial work load; current employees assigned to the duty just be able to assume the added tasks and non-salaried or volunteer personnel must be able to be in regular attendance.

It is necessary that the archivist also be empowered to certify copies of the records under the archives' control. Conversely, the archivist must be able to refuse any records offered for transfer that are not archival in nature. The archives must not be allowed to be used as a wastebasket or dead storage for inactive records no one is otherwise willing to deal with. Only records clearly identified as archival, i.e., those created prior to 1970 and mandated by s.8, c.66 for permanent retention, or those mandated for retention by the records retention schedule issued by the Supervisor of Public records, should be routinely accepted. Unscheduled records should be referred to the office of the Supervisor of Public Records for appraisal and scheduling. Nothing, of course, prohibits the archives from accepting records that have not been scheduled as permanent if this meets its collection policy.

The archivist must also guard against accepting permanent records that are still active. The municipal archivist will generally have neither the time nor the facilities to service the operational needs of the municipal offices.

A mechanism for the orderly transfer of records must be developed. Normally, transfers should occur on an annual basis, after the audit, along with the disposal of obsolete materials. The archivist is in a unique position to lobby for and assist other officers in developing a municipal records management program governing the storage, transfer, destruction and preservation of the municipality's records.

It is highly desirable that the archives be established as an independent department with its own budgeted source of operating funds. These funds should be sufficient for staffing, physical plant operation if necessary, servicing of holdings, and limited preservation activities. Reliance on funds from a "parent" department or from the departments having legal custody of the records will render the operations of the archives subject to the exigencies of those offices, and complicate long range planning and operational continuity.

2. All municipal officers must concur, in writing, to each transfer of their records to the archives. Under Section 6 of Chapter 66, the head of each office, department, board or commission of the municipality has custody to the records created by that office. The archives will only provide for the custodial care of the records, and the officers in charge of the originating offices will continue to have full responsibility for the accessibility and preservation of their records. This responsibility cannot be alienated. These officers must fully assent to the placement of their records in the care of the archives and be able to document the chain of custody. The responsible officers must be fully cognizant of the current status of their records and aware that, should the archives be unable to guarantee proper access or preservation, that responsibility will devolve upon them. Administrative procedures must also be developed by the archivist and legal custodians to ensure the security of sensitive information included in the records transferred to the archives.

3. Their legal custodians must periodically inspect all records transferred to the archives. The head of the offices originating the records retains full responsibility for their safe preservation. They must therefore conduct routine inspections of the records under the archivist's care to ensure their current status and to determine what steps, if any, must be taken to secure their preservation.

4. The archives shall be located in a municipally owned and operated building, preferably the building housing the greatest number of municipal offices. The records in the archives are not a discrete collection of defunct series, but a part of a vital and integral whole, closely related to the active records in the operational offices. They must therefore be easily available to researchers and at all times to municipal officers and with the least possible impediment. It is important that they be located as conveniently as possible to the center of municipal operations to facilitate access by both their legal custodians and by researchers. Should it for any reason be impossible to fulfill this requirement, microfilm or other facsimile of the records should be deposited with the operating office.

The municipality is responsible for the maintenance and security of its records, which must remain wholly within its operational control. Physical control of the records may not be delegated to a non-municipal entity.

In selecting a site for the archives, previous reference activity should be analyzed, and sufficient room allotted so that researchers may use the records while remaining in full view of the archivist.

5. All records transferred to the archives must be stored in rooms or vaults of fire resistance at least equivalent to those used for other municipal records. All municipal records must be protected against the dangers of fire, flood, theft, vandalism, environmental degradation, etc. This requirement applies equally to the archival and operational records of the municipality at large. It is the responsibility of the municipality to provide fire resistant rooms, safes and vaults to ensure the safety of its records (see s.12 c.66 GLM).

6. The records of the municipality must be strictly segregated from all other records that might be in the holdings of the archives. The rules of provenience must be strictly observed. The records of municipal offices are created and held ex officio, and not by any virtue of or relationship to the incumbent. Records are created not by a person but by the office that person holds. Not only is it important to separate a particular incumbent's private and public papers, it is necessary to separate the records relating to different municipal offices. This process can be complicated if a single incumbent has held multiple offices and not maintained the integrity of the files of these offices, or if s/he has conducted a private business while serving as a town officer and allowed business documents to become intermingled with those of the government.

7. Access to the records in the archives must be available on a basis equivalent to that which would be available to the municipal offices. Besides providing for the security of the records, the main function of the archives is to provide access and reference to municipal records for government officers and the research community at large. Section 10 of Chapter 66 requires that records be made available for inspection "at reasonable times and without unreasonable delay." A repository for public records that made those records available only by appointment or at limited and idiosyncratic hours would certainly fail this requirement. Such an arrangement would also fail to support the needs of the municipal government. Any archives of public records must be available to the public without impediment at all times the other governmental offices are, and must also be available as needed to support all other municipal operations.

The instrument establishing the archives should incorporate these principles as necessary to ensure that the requirements of the Public Records Law and the archive's mission of preservation, custody, support, and access are met. The details of day-to-day operation can be administratively determined but should be institutionalized as a written policy statement.

Examples of bylaws and ordinances establishing municipal archives are attached.

#### City Vaults Assessment

Cambridge Historical Commission

January 31, 1997

City Clerk

#### City Vaults Assessment

The following is a summary of the general types of records stored in City Departmental vaults and storage rooms. Figures for the total archival space requirements for each department will be calculated from the attached survey forms.

### Auditor

Location: (1) City Hall, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, Auditor's office,

Vault

(2) City Hall, basement, near the mail room

Records Manager: Jean Cusak, x4240

Dimensions: (1) 6' x 19' x 12'

(2) 10' x 17' x 8'

General Contents

1. ledgers, bound volumes, open tin boxes with trifolds
2. ledgers, bound volumes, open tin boxes, oversized volumes, books, soft notebooks, card files

### Assessor

Location: City Hall, by the Assessor's office

Records Manager: Kay Wheelock, x4343

Dimensions: 6' x 22'6"

General Contents of Vault: record books, card files, plot plans, tin storage boxes of excise exemptions, bound directories

### Treasurer

Location: City Hall, 1<sup>st</sup> floor, east

Records Manager: Susan Maroni, x4216

Dimensions: 8' x 20' x 12' high

General Contents: record boxes, IBM card boxes

Cambridge Historical Commission

January 31, 1996